

Chaos in Sarawak's Rainforest

by

Dr. Mikael Rothstein

The following perspective originated as an oral presentation in a seminar celebrating the 25 year anniversary of the journal CHAOS in Copenhagen, Denmark, spring 2007. A revised version in Danish will appear in a subsequent issue of CHAOS. The theme of the seminar was, of course, "chaos", and I chose to present some of my findings from an ongoing fieldwork among the Penan in Borneo. At the time of writing this brief introduction I am preparing two more trips into the forest of Sarawak, and hopefully much more data will appear. At this point I have published two articles and a chapter for a book pertaining to this project. The reader is encouraged to read these texts, and the other titles in the bibliography noted here, in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the topic before us.

A culture goes down

The Penan inhabits the western and northern parts of Borneo, primarily the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Until quite recently they were able to sustain themselves in the same way as their forefathers, as nomads living in the vast rain forests. There are three reasons why their traditional way of life is coming to an end:

Firstly, the forest is simply disappearing due to ruthless exploitation. Tropical hardwood makes a tremendous profit on the Chinese and Japanese markets, which has led to an immense ecological disaster.

Secondly, but linked to the problem of deforestation, the Malaysian government wants the Penan out of the forest in order to reach the national goal of becoming a modern, industrialised nation in the nearer future. In the "modern world" people cannot live in the jungle!

Thirdly, the Penan are subjected to Christian missionaries that systematically aim at deconstructing their religious and intellectual heritage. Malaysia is predominantly Islamic, but the Christians are allowed to roam freely among the Penan, as long as their efforts help the

government clear the forest from the nomads. The goal of the missionaries is to make the Penan leave their usual habitat, because “true Christians live in houses and wear clothes”, as one missionary explained to me.

The Penan have tried to resist in many ways during the past twenty years, but their social and political initiatives are too weak to change things in any fundamental way. Most Penan, consequently, have given up, and the majority now live in small villages at the rim of their former home in the forest. This kind of settlement brings the nomads in intimate relation with agricultural, settled peoples and tribes, and soon the forest-culture of the Penan will be lost.

This development is very recent. There are no villages where everybody was born outside the forest. At this point approximately 100 individuals remain in the jungle.

I have had the opportunity to visit the Penan in September 2005 and in January 2007, where I primarily stayed with groups in the forest. What I wish to discuss below is how the deforestation, and the influence of Christian missionaries, are eradicating the foundation for the Penans’ traditional social life and cognitive balance and thus forcing a new conceptual category upon them, “the chaotic”. By *chaotic*, in this connection, I refer to a *social and mental condition* as well as an *epistemological* category, but, in this case, an epistemological category that is under construction right now. “Chaos” is not a concept in the Penans’ traditional religious repertoire. Indeed we should not expect to find such a notion everywhere. Talking of “chaos-like ideas” is a more viable way of addressing the problem.

My approach for this brief case study will be ethnobiological as the forest people’s relation to birds provides a good prism for understanding what it means to loose foundation and to be forced into an entirely reorganised way of life in a new, confusing and basically unintelligible sociobiological context.

Bird Omenology

Birds are crucial to the Penan. They are central in religious narrative, they are used for divination in various ways, birds’ feathers are worn for religious ornamentation, and religious dances very often require the use of either feathers or other parts taken from birds. The religious representations of the Penan are forest products in the same way as the food people eat or the material they use for fabrication of tools or lodges.

The Penans’ most important use of birds is for divinatory purposes. This is done in a great number of ways. Basically birds are used as pathfinders. Their behaviour and song is interpreted according to a tremendously elaborate knowledge of sounds and movements. Traditionally the Penan would always follow the directions suggested by the birds: “We follow the birds. Otherwise we might get lost in the forest. The birds know us and guide us”, one man explained to me. Another told me how birds had come to his rescue to guide his way on more than one occasion, when he had lost his orientation. The movements of one particular bird take the travelling Penan in one direction; the song or another species indicates a pause or a new direction. The basic principle remains the same: The actions of humans are, to a certain extent, interlinked with that of certain birds.

This could seem to cause a lot of confusion, but there are a number of biological reasons why the system actually works. Firstly the number of birds in dense rainforest is very limited. There are many different species (more than in most other biological habitats), but the number of individuals within each species is quite low, sometimes surprisingly low. Furthermore many species only live in certain areas or in the vicinity of certain plants. Consequently the wandering Penan-groups will only encounter the omen birds occasionally. Furthermore, not each and every species is an omen bird. The system is balanced.

The Birds are Gone

At this point the Penan are facing a strange problem: The birds have become very rare: “We are not receiving directions the way we used to”, people explained. “We don't know where to go. We have become people with no direction and no purpose”. A young man said that it was difficult for him to become a good hunter because the signs that used to be given by the birds were no longer available: “I learn about the birds, but I rarely see them. They are not there to help me during the hunt”, he explained. The birds would under normal circumstances reveal where to go for prey.

But what do you do if that, which used to define your direction, is gone? The people I met were in distress. They felt abandoned and confused: The implicit map that used to be drawn by the birds is no longer created, and the precondition for the most important social events, the nomadic movements in the landscape and the hunt, is gone: “People with no direction and no purpose”, the man said.

The interpretation of what the birds relate takes place in social interaction between human beings. When the forest dies and the birds go away, there are no divinatory messages to interpret, and therefore neither a physical, nor a social-cognitive space in which the Penan can operate. People lose their sense of orientation and their sense of meaning. Order cannot be maintained and, commemorating the subject of our seminar, a sense of “the chaotic” gradually takes over.

This chaos, however, is not of the creative kind that is periodically embraced in order to refresh life, as we know it from other cultures. It is not a chaotic disintegration that is necessary for a new order to come about, as we know it from numerous myths and rituals. The chaos experienced by the Penan is not a part of their traditional religious imaginations, not a myth and not a ritual construct. It is an alarming *fact*. This is, so to say, chaos *for real*. It is a sense of the chaotic brought about by an experience of anomie in the Durkheimian sense of the word.

The impact of the Christian missionaries is also rather important in this connection. Having talked to a number of missionaries, I have learned that their prime target is what they term the “false and dangerous beliefs” of the Penan. The discourse of the missionaries defines with no hesitation the Penan as primitive, child like, unintelligent and filthy. By counteracting the importance of the omen birds, so they told me, they hope to be able to change (they say “save”) the Penan. The missionaries also told me that they would always explain to the Penan that the omen birds are “evil” and “sent by the Devil”, and that all problems are caused by the “disgusting birds”. “We need to make them abandon their primitive superstition. They need to mature and to know God” I was told.

To some extent the missionaries are successful. People who have left the forest and joined Christian churches told me that they were very lucky because they had escaped the “lure of the evil birds”. One man said that if, by chance, he would hear or see one of his former omen birds, he would instantly turn to Jesus and seek protection: “He is the most powerful *sitan*”, the most powerful spirit. Being settled this man had no need for the guiding birds. In effect the missionaries are transforming the Penan category of *omen bird* into a Christian (New Testament like) concept of *demon*.

We may consider the impact of all this through an old theory (which also happened to be the subject of my very first student-article in the very first prototypical issue of the journal *Chaos*, which is now a Danish-Norwegian-Swedish joint venture, in 1982):

In 1957 American anthropologist Omar Khayyam Moore offered an interpretation of types of divination that are comparable to that employed by the Penan. He suggested that divination is supplying a chance mechanism that directs some human activities towards randomness in situations where regularity could be disadvantageous. By observing the birds - which the Penan can not possibly control - an extra-human element is introduced into the process of deciding where to go, where to hunt etc. According to the theory this may in fact *increase* the Penans' chances of encountering their game and, as I would suggest, to avoid social conflict. If the group agrees to follow the decisions of an oracle because everybody attributes authority to it, the chances of disagreement are reduced and social stability probably strengthened. These mechanisms will, of course, disappear when the bird oracle is no longer effective. Once the birds are gone people are lacking the impetus to move on. Where are they supposed to go? Where to hunt? Deprived of the mechanisms that used to provide social and cognitive *meaning*, the Penan disintegrate as a culture. But this problem is of secondary importance as the environment itself is also disappearing.

The process of cultural change

The preconditions for the Penans' entire symbolic system are falling apart. The religious symbols are loosing their meaning as the physical and cultural milieu, to which they belong, is declining. While it is easy to see the physical drama, it is more difficult to see the emotional and cognitive consequences of what is going on, but listening to the Penan makes it easier to understand: I was talking to a group of men who had been on yet an unsuccessful hunt. One of the men showed me his empty hands and said: “The forest is empty. All the things we used to see and hear are no longer there. Our eyes and ears can't understand it. It is strange. We no longer know the places”. The pattern is the same whenever people talk about their distress: They will always list what was supposed to be, but is gone. Animal after animal, tree after tree, plant after plant. They discursively explain their situation by emphasizing this grotesque contrast. They are, so to say, imbedded in a chaotic reality while desperately talking about the world, as it *ought to be*.

What is related in such remarks is very important: The changes in the physical conditions affect the Penan in fundamental ways. It is difficult for them to interpret the absence of sounds, odours and sights, and they are left in an intellectual and cognitive vacuum. Men, who have been

taught the art of hunting since they were little kids, are unable to use their skills, and there is nothing to replace what is lost. No birds to interpret, no game to shoot and therefore nothing to do. No culture to maintain.

The relative absence of omen birds can be interpreted in an even broader context. As the birds have become silent people feel abandoned by the spirits they used to relate to. If they accept the teachings of the Christian missionaries they may relate to new mythological entities and a new cosmology, but they will still miss something that was an important cultural feature not long ago. As a consequence the prominent position of the birds has been substituted with a reinforced focus on *other* elements in the religious repertoire of the Penan. What I heard most about was the evil spirits that inhabit the forests, real nasty creatures that may suck your blood, eat your eyes, drown you in rivers, remove your bones, or make you loose your orientation. As some of the Penan see it, the evil spirits have joined forces with the loggers and the Christian missionaries: “The evil spirits are much more powerful than they used to be. They have killed the good spirits”, a group of men told me. There have always been good and bad spirits in the mythological systems of the Penan, but at this point, on the Penans’ path towards cultural destruction, the bad forces have taken over as the cosmic equilibrium, that used to prevail, is gone. Indeed the religious emphasis of evil or harmful spirits may be interpreted, as a reflection of the concrete conditions people are in fact experiencing. Why entertain the idea of benevolent spirits when they are obviously pacified by the bad ones? And why else suggest an alliance between loggers, Christian missionaries, and the bad spirits? It seems as if a new chaos-like notion is developing; the notion that a false, wrong or bad world is taking over.

Obviously the Christians are taking advantages of this situation by offering their own divine beings as loving and caring alternatives. Some Penan accept this offer, others (as we have seen) remain sceptic, while some will try to balance things: “They [the missionaries] say that God knows everything, but I don't think he knows about the Penan and about the forest. So, I don't know if I should do as they say”, a young man told me. Another responded, almost in defence of the Christians: “God is not from the forest, so how could he know about us? He knows about villages”.

At this point the religious imagination of the Penan does not include concepts similar to “chaos”. The compiler of the only Penan dictionary and the most knowledgeable researcher regarding the Penan language, anthropologist Ian Mackenzie, supports this conclusion. In a private correspondence with me he writes:

I know of no word or expression that comes anywhere close to translating “chaos”. The fact is, among peoples of the earth, the Penan have had one of the most secure ways of life possible [...] For them, the loss of the secure, stable, unchanging world of the forest was simply unimaginable.

I have, however, been able to identify a concept that indicates a thought pattern, which, under the present conditions, could accommodate “the chaotic” as opposed to “the cosmic”. The key concept is *tongtana*, which, initially, may be translated with the word *forest*. The actual meaning of the word, however, is “land” or “world”, but as the forest is “the world” there is no difference. It is

probably correct to say that the Penan took the forest so much for granted that they never had a word for it. The forest was the world and vice versa. The further semantic implications of *tongtana* point in the same direction: *Tongtana* is not simply “the forest” or “the world”, but more precisely the forest or the world where human beings can sustain themselves, where the forefathers lived, where locations have names, where history is identified, where the spirits roam, and where animals and plants all have names and are known. Hence, the present environment available to the Penan is not *tongtana*, even if it is a forest. It is not the Penans’ world – in fact we may question if it is “the world” at all. The secondary forest (the forest that has appeared after two or three consecutive loggings) lacks everything that makes it *tongtana*. People are unable to sustain themselves under the present conditions, the places associated with the forefathers are gone, and the spirits have become silent. The forest has become a “place”, but not the “cosmic space” where human beings are supposed to live, the place referred to in myths, the place of sacred topography.

The Penan are intellectually distressed and emotionally exhausted, and they desperately long for an environment where they can thrive and align with the spirits.

The present crisis, I would suggest, has led to the creation of a new but nameless category in the minds of the forest dwelling Penan: The negation of *tongtana*. They now talk of “the dead or empty forest”, “the dead or empty world”. My tentative conclusion is that a new cosmological concept, implying things chaotic, is rising from the sad and confusing experience of social anomie, and that the Christian missionaries are the only ones that can provide a cosmology that is able to accommodate the unbearable situation. Ironically, the religious actors that purposely destroy the world of the Penan (the Christian missionaries), are also bearers of the only religious system available to the Penan that may explain the catastrophe to the forest people: They are sinners, and what they are experiencing is the just eradication of Satan’s habitat, the forest. The work of a mythological figure that was virtually unknown to them a generation ago: the god known as God. In order to survive intellectually and develop a meaningful explanation of what is going on, the Penan, therefore, are forced to acknowledge that they are primitive, ignorant and in deep need for the salvation of the loving and caring god of the Christians. How evil does it get?

Michael Rothstein has published extensively on anthropology and religion. He is an Associate Professor at the Section of History of Religions, Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and his academic interest includes Borneo, Hawaii and emerging religions.

Contact: m.rothstein@hum.ku.dk

References

- Brosius, J. Peter,
1999 "The Western Penan of Borneo". Pp. 312-316 in Richard B. Lee & Richard Daly (eds.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Chen, Paul C. Y.
1990, *Penans. The Nomads of Sarawak*. Pelanduk Publications
- Davis, Wade & Tom Henly
1990, *Penan Voice for the Borneo Rain Forest*. Vancouver: Western Canada Wilderness Committee
- Davis, Wade, Ian MacKenzie & Shane Kennedy
1995, *Nomads of the Dawn: Penan of the Borneo Rainforest*. San Francisco: Pomegranate Europe Ltd.
- Hoffman, Carl L.,
1983, "An Essay on Punan Religion". Pp. 30-33 in *Borneo Research Bulletin* no. 15
1986, *The Punan. Hunters and gatherers of Borneo*, UMI Research Press Studies in Cultural Anthropology, no. 12, Ann Arbor 1986 (1983).
- Langub, Jayl.
1989, "Some Aspects of Life of The Penan". Pp. 169-184 + ill. in *The Sarawak Museum Journal* Vol. XL, No. 61 (New Series)
2001, *Penan Folk Stories. Suklet Penan*. Kuching: University Malaysia Sarawak, Dayak Studies,
Oral Literature Series No. 2
Manser, Bruno.
1996, *Voices from the Rainforest. Testimonies of a Threatened People*. Bruno Manser Foundation/INSAN, Selangor.
- Needham, Rodney.
1954, "The System of Teknonyms and Death-names of the Penan". Pp. 416-431 in *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol 10
- Nicolaisen, Johannes.
1976, "The Penan of the Seventh Division of Sarawak: Past, Present, and Future". Pp. 35-61 in *The Sarawak Museum Journal* Vol. XXIV, No. 45 (New Series)
- Sellato, Bernhard J.L.
1994, *Nomads of the Borneo Rainforest: The Economics, Politics, and Ideology of Settling Down*. Honolulu: University of Honolulu Press
- Sercombe, Peter & Bernard Sellato (eds.)
2007, *Beyond the Green Myth: Borneo's Hunter-gatherers in the Twenty-first Century*. Copenhagen: NIAS (Studies in Asian Topics)
- Siy, Alexandra.
1993, *The Penan: People of the Borneo Jungle: Global Villages*. New York: Dillon Press